

YOUR
LETTERS

MAILBOX

Who's that with the gavel and the curly wig? It's us, passing judgement on the legality of DVD region coding and file-sharing. Just don't confuse us with the US publication of the same name

★ **Code comfort** Playing DVDs in a drive

I want to fit a DVD writer in my computer. I know that this will allow me to watch DVDs, but will it allow me to watch bought DVDs? Will the region code affect the new player?

Keith

It is a simple question, but it opens a can of worms. The simple answer is that any DVD drive installed in a PC will be able to read commercial DVDs. If you have Windows XP or earlier you will also need some software to play the movies. Windows Vista Home Premium includes the necessary software to play DVDs in Windows Media Player.

The regionalisation issue is an interesting one. Windows allows you to change the region of your drive, so it can switch between handling region 1 (US) and region 2 (UK) discs. However, you can only make this change a set number of times, after which the drive will stay set to the last region you picked. You will usually be able to make the change five times.

There are ways to bypass this Region Protection Control (RPC2), although the legality of doing this depends on where you are at the time. In the US you might fall foul of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), which outlaws attempts to circumvent copyright controls. In the UK things are different, although they are by no means entirely clear.

One issue is how you obtain your region 1 discs. The key to this is something called parallel importing, which involves buying goods abroad where they are cheaper and importing them. For example, CDs licensed for sale in Hong Kong cost less than the same products in the UK. For various copyright reasons it is illegal to import and resell these CDs. However, the rules surrounding DVDs appear to be more relaxed.

We've seen domestic multi-region DVD players in the high street, and stores such as Amazon.co.uk will

sell region 1-encoded discs to UK customers, so is it legal to buy them, and does that mean you can convert your computer to play DVDs from all regions?

Jim Angel, from the Federation Against Copyright Theft, points to UK censorship laws and the Computer Misuse Act. All movies you buy in the UK must have British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) markings. You can buy DVDs abroad for your own use, but if you buy an unclassified movie from a shop in the UK, that shop has broken the law.

For information on unsetting your DVD's region restrictions, see FAQ, page 46. Even adjusting your PC in this way has its own legal ramifications, though. The Computer Misuse Act 1990, Section 3, covers the modification of computer systems in order to bypass copyright protection. It seems that technically you could be prosecuted for bypassing your DVD drive's region protection control. In practice (and in our unqualified opinion), you are exceptionally unlikely to be prosecuted as an individual attempting to watch movies you have bought legally, regardless of whether or not you have modified your PC. As Jim Angel told us, "It's all a bit of a minefield".



▲ The legality of converting the region coding on your PC's DVD drive to watch the latest movies is murky

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MAKE ISPs PAY FOR FILE SHARING



Surely efforts to curb illegal file-sharing should focus on ISPs, not individuals? BitTorrent activity now supposedly accounts for 35 per cent of all web traffic. Only a tiny proportion of this traffic is legal, and such files could be shared by any one of a number of other, more accountable methods.

Any ISP allowing BitTorrent traffic should be threatened with prosecution for trafficking in stolen goods. Legislation should be passed to give this threat teeth. ISPs would quickly block BitTorrent traffic, removing the means for distribution of pirated software, movies and music.

If unchecked, illegal file-sharing will without question seriously jeopardise the output of quality television, film, music, games and software.

Harry Smith

ISPs try to distance themselves from analysing the content of the traffic sent to and from their customers. You could argue that the more involved they become in what you and others are doing, the more responsible they are for that content. They could end up monitoring everything that their users do online, which would be a lot of work and could make them legally liable for libels, copyright infringements and other problems because they should have been aware of these infractions.

ISPs are also reluctant to block suspicious traffic in case they accidentally prevent legitimate content getting through. This is why computer viruses and spam are able to traverse the internet so easily.

It is quite possible that most BitTorrent traffic involves illegal content, but until someone proves this, very few ISPs will block it. What's more, all ISPs will need to do so at the same time, otherwise customers will move to the more relaxed companies.



Finally, blocking internet services is not as simple as you might think. Without getting too deeply into the details, it is fairly easy for people running a file-sharing system to change the way it works to avoid restrictions placed by firewalls and other mechanisms. However, it would be time-consuming and costly for the ISPs to keep abreast of these changes.

SHORT-SIGHTED VISTA



I am writing regarding the letters you published in *Shopper* December 2007 about features that are missing from Windows Vista. Not only does Vista lack the fax program, it is also missing Outlook Express.

When Microsoft started MSN many moons ago, I signed up and got an @msn.com email address. Microsoft provided a server URL to use with its HTTP server, which enabled me to save messages offline, write answers offline and then connect briefly to send them.

Later MSN dropped its subscription charge and made all the MSN email addresses Hotmail ones. However, Windows Vista has replaced Outlook Express with Windows Mail, which won't connect to a Hotmail address.

Fortunately, whenever I buy a new PC I always keep the old one. So I still have Windows XP with Outlook Express, a fax facility and the invaluable Microsoft Photo Editor.

Over the past 20 years I've learned that Microsoft has a habit of dropping useful features from new versions of software.

Stephen Wells

It's true: Windows Mail, Vista's replacement for Outlook Express, does not support Microsoft's own web-based email service. Neither will it work with other web-based services such as AOL, Yahoo! Mail and Google Mail.

Microsoft itself has a solution to this problem, which it details at <http://support.microsoft.com/kb/926374>. Unfortunately, the answer is to switch from Windows Mail to an unfinished product called Windows Live Mail Beta. You can download it from http://get.live.com/betas/maildesktop_betas.

Windows Mail supports POP3 and IMAP, so Google Mail users could still use the program by enabling either of these features when they log into their Google Mail webpage.

NO FLASHING



In *Shopper* December 2007, Tom Ruben suggested placing an address document on flash drives so that they can be returned if they are lost. This is not a good idea. If you find a flash drive, don't be tempted to try to use it.

One technique used by hackers trying to get a Trojan on to computers in a target organisation is to leave infected flash drives where they may be picked up by employees, such as on the ground near the entrance to their workplace.

A safer alternative is to write or engrave your name and phone number or address on the outside. A house number and postcode is usually enough; for example, '30 W1T 4JD' will find the offices of *Computer Shopper*.

Rob Hindle

That's a valid point. Accessing untrusted media is very unwise. While a good anti-virus scanner will find the most common threats, you can never be 100 per cent sure, and a targeted attack such as the one described is likely to use customised Trojans that may evade detection.

POINTS OF VIEW



I was interested to read your reviews of compact digital cameras (*Shopper* December 2007), but was disappointed to note that you virtually ignored a critical feature: the viewfinder. Your table does list the cameras with viewfinders (sadly only two), but you don't mention how good they are.

There are many advantages in having a viewfinder, but if you're long-sighted, they are almost essential. Without one, I have to hold the camera at arm's length to be able to focus on the LCD screen. This not only increases the risk of camera shake but also increases the risk of getting in the way of passers-by.

Take a look around at older people using digital cameras and you will see what I mean. Even if your eyesight is up to switching rapidly between something six inches from your nose and something a couple of hundred yards away, you are never going to get a steadier hold of the camera than when it is pressed up against your eye.

Varifocals also pose a problem. The field of view they have means you have to bob your head up and down to get the LCD screen or your target in focus. Taking a picture out of a car or train window is impossible if you are next to the window. If you are on a narrow path you block the whole path standing there with your arms out. Friends of my age all agree on the need for a viewfinder.

Nick Hoare

While we do accept that they are very useful in many circumstances, viewfinders have their limitations, not least with more compact cameras. Often they are so tiny as to be useless for people without 20/20 vision, although digital SLR models are usually very clear.

They also show their limits when the camera zooms in close to subjects, because they aren't usually very accurate at displaying the image that will be recorded. However, lots of zooming

Dirty! Cleaning kit winners

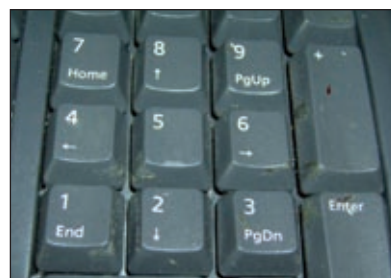
Since we launched a campaign to clean up dirty keyboards, *Shopper* readers have been sending in photographs of their putrid peripherals. Some have been merely filthy, others downright gag-inducingly revolting. All the following readers win cleaning kits, which we really hope they will use.



▲ I bought a black keyboard to hide some of the muck that accumulates, but it appears worse, as you can see - Ian Quarry



▲ Can I get a kit please? My keyboard is really dirty - Alan Alexander



▲ I read your article on PC cleaning and have attached a photo. I never realised how dirty my PC was until then - Darrin Millar

WRITE IN AND WIN!

Everyone runs out of disk space sooner or later. One way to solve the problem is to send us a great letter. That's because Western Digital has kindly agreed to furnish our Star Letter writers with a capacious 1TB My Book Pro external hard disk. This external drive connects using USB2 or FireWire. It supports both FireWire 400 and 800, and can transfer data twice as fast as some external disks we've tested. It can provide 1TB of storage, or 500GB using the safety-first mirrored mode. This sleek-looking unit comes complete with Retrospect backup software and even has an LED indicator on the front to display how much free disk space remains.



PLUS!

Every published letter-writer who provides their address also receives a *Computer Shopper* mug



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also usually requires the use of a tripod to avoid camera shake, so the viewfinder often becomes less necessary in these circumstances.

Some digital cameras have viewfinders with a diopter. This is an adjustable lens that lets you take photos without your glasses. This could be particularly handy for long-sighted people, who can focus on distant subjects easily but can't view objects close up. This could also help solve the varifocal bobbing problem you describe.

Neither the Canon nor the Nikon cameras in our group test featured a diopter, but ultra-zoom camera usually have them for their electronic viewfinders (EVFs), which are essentially another screen. A good example is Panasonic's FZ18 (see *What's New*, page 42). These EVFs let you focus your eye somewhere in the middle distance.

XP BALLY ATROCIOUS

 In *Shopper* December 2007 you state that Microsoft is offering a downgrade from Windows Vista to XP. How does one get hold of this?

Brian Davis

The news story to which you refer said: "Microsoft is offering a new option to PC manufacturers that will allow customers to downgrade a new Windows Vista-based system so that it runs Windows XP." The key point is that Microsoft is dealing with PC manufacturers, not the general public.

As a result of the deal, companies that build Windows Vista PCs can include a disc with the system that allows users to downgrade the computer so that it runs Windows XP. To do this you will need a special restore disc, which will be

supplied by your PC's manufacturer. This disc will be supplied with the system when you buy it.

Therefore, current PC owners are unlikely to be able to get hold of a downgrade restore disc. It is possible that some manufacturers will supply one after you've already bought a PC, in which case we'd imagine that there would be at least a nominal charge.

DEATH MARCH OF THE PENGUIN

 Like Bob Hinton, whose letter you published in the November 2007 issue, I too was disappointed to see that *Linux Expert* has been dropped. It was because of *Linux Expert* in your November 2006 issue that I finally plucked up the courage to try Linux, loading Ubuntu 6.06 on an old notebook destined for the tip (really), as Windows Me was running like a dog with three legs, the Ethernet card was no longer working and there was little space left on the 10GB hard disk.

Not only did Ubuntu recognise the Ethernet card, it only recognised all the other hardware, resulting in a useful notebook with a nice-looking graphical interface working at a decent speed with plenty of disk space. That notebook is now part of my home network, and I have since added a wireless card, too. As a result I was motivated to install a more advanced Linux distribution on a new notebook, which I would previously never have dreamed of doing. Now I hardly ever use Windows.

The Vista upgrade DVD that came with my new notebook remains uninstalled, as I find Linux excellent. The Beryl/Compiz Fusion 3D desktop is gorgeous (I find it useful, too) and

the amount of good-quality open-source software matches anything Windows has to offer. Applications such as Amarok, K3b and XSane, for example, are excellent. So, more Linux-related articles please. After all, even Tesco is now selling cheap Linux PCs.

Bill Hill

Linux is here to stay, although not in a dedicated *Shopper* column. That's not to say that we don't cover Linux any more. In fact, the new *Advanced Projects* column takes a very impartial view, covering both Linux and Windows. More changes are planned for *Shopper*, so keep an eye open over the coming months.

EUROPEAN TOUR

 My other half and I are currently planning a six-month tour of western and northern Europe in a motor home, and I've run across a couple of things that I need some help with. The plan is to get a ferry across to mainland France in April and to follow the coast around, through Spain and Portugal, into Italy, up through Germany and then into Scandinavia. We expect to get back home some time in September or October 2008.

Obviously we want to be in communication with family and friends while away, so this leads to my main question. I am thinking of buying a notebook so that we can have access to the internet, staying in contact with everyone via email and instant messenger. I'm pretty computer-savvy, but I'm unsure what to do about buying a contract for mobile communications in different countries. Will I

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Printed by BGP, Bicester, Oxon
Distributors Seymour 020 7396 8000

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COMPUTER SHOPPER INCORPORATES UPGRADE SHOPPER, GAMES SHOPPER, INTERNET SHOPPER, MOBILE SHOPPER, PC SHOPPER, PORTABLE SHOPPER AND SOFTWARE SHOPPER

ABC 83,390 (average monthly sales Jan-Dec 2006)

A DENNIS PUBLICATION

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ISSN 0955-8578



need different SIM cards for each country, or can I pick up a single, reasonably priced contract that will cover us wherever we are?

Finally, is there any notebook or ultra-portable PC that you could recommend? Usage would be purely internet and some minor office tasks, such as keeping a journal.

Jason

What we don't recommend you do is to hook up your regular mobile phone to your notebook and surf across Europe. The data charges that you incur would be hard to track and most likely add up to a horrendous figure. Buying different SIM cards could work out cheaper, but you'd face a headache trying to set up internet access with each one (don't forget, you won't have internet access to seek online help when you're there).

Probably the best bet is to choose a UK-based mobile operator and choose a tariff that includes data-roaming services. It is quite likely that you will have to explore business options, which are more likely to cater for people who need internet access across a wide range of countries.

Vodafone provides 3G coverage in most of the countries that you mention, with the notable exceptions of Denmark and Norway, which have only the slower GPRS service. Vodafone has a number of tariffs for internet travellers, but none is what we would call cheap.

The most appropriate one seems to be the Mobile Broadband Travel service. A data card for a notebook is free on an 18-month contract, which costs £111.63 per month. A card is £60 with a 12-month contract. You can use 3GB of data each month, although you are not allowed

to use streaming video, peer-to-peer file-sharing or certain online TV services.

If this sounds like too much to stomach, then you're probably best off using wireless hotspots (www.jiwire.com has a comprehensive directory) and internet cafés. You'll find this a lot cheaper in the long run, although it's not as flexible.

ANOTHER SHOPPER?



I am a puzzled *Shopper* subscriber. In September I was looking at the magazine rack in the nearest Tesco, and saw *Computer Shopper* among those on display. I didn't take much interest at first, because I had just received my copy through the post.

Then I saw that the front cover did not look quite the same as usual, and that the contents on the front cover had a number of items of interest, which I didn't recall seeing in the version I had just received. I then checked the issue number, which was 227, October 2007.

Today I checked and found that the current issue number is 237 for November, and that October's edition did not seem to have the interesting articles anyway.

Unfortunately, the store is 25 miles away so I cannot go back and have another look. Is there another magazine on sale in the UK called *Computer Shopper* with a similar front page layout, or am I just becoming senile?

Nigel Cox

Don't worry, you're not going senile. There is indeed another *Computer Shopper*, which is published in the USA. Some shops import it and sell it alongside UK titles such as this one. ☐

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